Fish & Wildlife Service—National Conservation Training Center
Conservation and Community Public Lecture Series
Speaking with Stephen Potter

Speakers:
Mark Madison
Stephen Potter

[audio start]

Mark: Hi. I'm Mark Madison, and today is September 9th, 2009. I'd like to welcome you to a podcast with Dr. Stephen Potter, who is visiting NCTC to give a public lecture here this afternoon. He did a TV broadcast here this afternoon. Dr. Potter's the regional archeologist for the National Parks Service National Capital Region, which includes over 88,000 acres of parkland in portions of Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. In 1993, he published a book called *Commoners, Tribute, and Chiefs: The Development of Algonquian Culture and the Potomac Valley.* Among his many expertises include archeological work on Civil War battle field sites and American Indian sites. He's just given a great talk on Aboriginal America from 1607 to 1676. Welcome Dr. Potter. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Stephen: Well, thank you so much Mark. I appreciate it.

Mark: And I've just given a quick synopsis, but maybe you could give listeners a sense of what you do as a regional archeologist.

Stephen: It's my position to manage the regional archeology program throughout the region, and that includes providing archeological services to the park superintendents that are part of the region. This can either be with Parks Service Archeologists, in which case we have to restrict ourselves to short project, one, three, four days at most in the field, keeping in mind that for every one hour that an archeologist has in the field, at a minimum, we have to have 4 to 6 to do everything else. Process the artifacts, catalog them, record the archeological site, and then write up the results.

And then we go to the other end of the spectrum, where through an Indefinite Delivery, Indefinite Quantities contract, which is good for 5 years, and then it goes out for competitive bid at the end of the contract period, we have a contract with a major archeological firm. And we depend on that firm to provide us the long term sorts of projects that we need to have done within our parks. Ones that would be 6 months or longer. And most of these types of projects are what we refer to as identification and evaluation studies, where a chunk of the national park has not been surveyed for archeological resources, it's not had the

primary literature both historical and also the secondary archeological literature thoroughly researched. So we would hire the firm that was the recipient of the Indefinite Quantities contract to undertake these longer term studies, which can last, in some cases up to 9 years. Most of the time though, they're a 3 year or 4 year project. And the purpose is to not only identify and record new archeological sites, but then to also evaluate them for possible significance and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

Other things that we do, I have 3 fine archeologists who work with me and make up part of the regional archeology program. And one of those individuals is the Archeological Collections Manager, because we manage for most of the parks of the National Capital Region over 2 million archeological specimens. And all of these things of course are still the property of the particular unit that they came from. I say property, but that they are accountable for. So we simply are their custodians. But we nonetheless have to make sure that they are curated according to federal and parks service territorial standards. They have to be put into our own software system. And then we also are involved in resource protection. Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, ARPA, and so we provide part of the team that makes up the team involved in any kind of resource violation involving archeological resources. That team being the US District Attorney's office, the law enforcement ranger, or law enforcement personnel. In our case, if it's in the core area down around the Washington DC involve US Park Police, and then a professional archeologist. So we make up part of that team of 3 different occupations that have to be part and parcel of the investigation and potential of ARPA violations on National Park Property.

And then the other big chunk is what I'm doing here today, public interpretation. I would like that to be more of what I do.

Mark: And you do it well.

Stephen: Well, thank you. But for a variety of reasons, we get tied up so much in not only doing what I've outlined, providing archeological field services, providing input, as well as I might add, training for archeological resource protection, curating collections. So by the time we get to interpretation, it unfortunately is sort of the gravy, but not as much of the meal as I would like.

Mark: Well, maybe we should segue to the gravy. Let me ask you briefly, tonight you're going to talk about Aboriginal America, from 1607 to 1676. Why is that period interesting to you?

Stephen: Because at the end of 1676, the stage has been set and you could almost then predict, not the outcome, but at least the fact that there would have been a clash for the possession of the continent between France and England. So it's interesting to me that these formative 70 odd years which involved France, Sweden, Holland, England, the Maryland English, the Virginia English, and even though they're a little further south, they're never out of the picture, our friends, the Spanish. And all of these folks were not only competing one against another. Even if they were English, the Virginians and Marylanders most of the time had no love lost on one another. And it is a period that when you consider the complexities there and when you consider all the political complexities on the American Indian side of the equation, it makes what happened during that 70 years not only incredibly fluid and incredibly dynamic, but the end result is the destruction of American Indian groups that had been the buffers between the various Europeans, most often the Maryland and Virginia English, and other Indian groups further into the interior. Also, they served as buffers for Indian groups that were being wooed by other European powers, and not necessarily in a good way for the Maryland or Virginia English. And so at the conclusion of 1676 and what is known in Virginia at least as Bacon's Rebellion, the fall line American Indian buffer groups have either been decimated or reduced to the point where they are tributary to one of the two imperial powers. And I'm not just talking about the English as an imperial power. The five-nation Iroquois, who in their own way as American Indians were an imperial power, who held sway and influence over a huge chunk of the Eastern woodlands. And with the removal of these buffer groups, you then had further expansion of certainly English speaking settlers, and other European groups. Finns, Swedes, Dutch, further west into the interior, and then this would precipitate the whole beginnings of a struggle for a continent against France and England. And you can see that. It's already set up. It's almost foreordained at the conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

Mark: It's a great story. It's complex, but you tell it very well. And the one native American, the one American Indian we think we might know something about, the only name many of us know popularly is Pocahontas, and you made a nice point that much of what we know about Pocahontas, based on Disney films and so on is wrong. Why don't you tell us a little about the, very briefly, the last question about the real Pocahontas, so we can get out the truth.

Stephen: Well, it's interesting, when that, the first of the Disney films loosely, and I can't emphasize the word loosely enough, based on Powhatan, Pocahontas, and John Smith, came out, I gave a presentation at the Main Interior called In Search of the Real Pocahontas.

Well, first off, I know that you Dr. Madison had mentioned you weren't aware that she had actually been kidnapped. She, according to other English accounts, was serving as an ambassador if you will for her father, Powhatan, who indeed was the paramount chief of this large, complex political group that included at least 15,000 people living in most of what is now Tidewater, Virginia to another group. The other group being the Potomacs, for whom the river takes its name. Because at the time Smith came up the river in June of 1608, they were the most powerful political group on the river. And most often times, the river took its name from whoever was king of the heap at that moment. So the names of rivers will change for a variety of different reasons, but the change in political fortunes being one.

So she is trading ostensibly as an ambassador for her father to the Potomacs when a fellow by the name of Captain Argyle from Jamestown comes up trading with the Potomac River Algonquian speaking peoples to get a variety of things, particularly corn. Because Jamestown is still having some trouble in being totally self sufficient. So Indian corn or maize is still a big deal. And obviously, if you can get other things of value, furs, what have you, he's going to do that too. So he finds out Pocahontas is here at the village of [Past Patanze]. And he sort of sweet talks his way into the chief who ruled that village and got him for a copper kettle, and this is their terms, the Jamestown English, a few less valuable toys, to agree to help him con Pocahontas to come on his ship, and then he was going to pull up the plank and off they go. And that's exactly what happened. So for a copper kettle and some other less valuable toys, Argyle cons the sub chief, or the […] or the [Past Patanze] to get Pocahontas on this ship, and then set sail back to Jamestown and delivers her there.

She's a young girl at this point. She may not have even passed the girl's puberty rites, but I think she probably had by the time she's taken to Jamestown. So this is where we have the whole story about her doing cartwheels through the streets of Jamestown. And at that time, she probably, definitely, did not look like an aerobicized Barbie Doll as she appeared in the Disney films. She most likely would have been 12-ish, and so, like I say, it's probable that she may not have gone through her puberty rites yet, because puberty perhaps had not started for her at that point. Her haircut, she would have looked more like Moe on the Three Stooges, not to take away from her looks, because I'm not saying that she looked at all like him, but the haircut, she would have had bangs in the front, and it would have literally looked like you set a bowl over her head and then trimmed around. So, you can also look at it as a short bob, perhaps from the flappers of the 1920s. When a young woman then began puberty, and past her puberty rites, she was allowed to grow her hair out, except for the front, which remained fringed. So long hair was

highly prized in Algonquian society, and there are accounts that they let them grow an ell. An ell was an English measure of unit for measuring for measuring yard goods, but it was 45 inches, so that would be quite a hunk of hair. So, once they had passed puberty rites, you would know whether you were dealing with a young maiden who was of marriageable age by her hair style. So if she had bangs and her hair was growing out or was long, then you would know, she's a maiden. When she became married, they would let the bangs grow out, and then oftentimes, they would wear the hair rather than loose in a great plait down the back.

So she definitely when she first went to Jamestown would not have looked like the Disney version. Now, by the time that Pocahontas was married to John Rolfe, in the church at Jamestown, yes, she would have been very much a young woman, and her hair would have grown out, and she would have perhaps been somewhat closer to a Disney image. But I dare say the outfit she would have worn would not have been worn over one shoulder and something approaching some sort of woman's Grecian fashion, but rather that it would have been somewhat different. Clearly, though, once she was baptized at Jamestown, which she was, because in order to marry Rolfe, he couldn't have married a "heathen." And so she was converted and baptized, and then after she was converted then baptized, then they were married. She would probably have taken on some form of European dress, adopted it in some fashion, from the dress that she and her contemporaries would normally have worn. Which, in the warmer months, it would have simply been some kind of a, for lack of a better term, I'll just make it easy and say it would have been a deer skinned skirt. They would have been bare breasted and it's only in the coldest of weather that they would have worn a garment that would have covered all of them.

Mark: Another point you made, it was almost like a diplomatic marriage, a marriage between states at some point. Do you want to elaborate on that just briefly for me?

Stephen: Sure. We know from John Rolfe's own writings, because he had to seek the permission of the counsel that governed Jamestown to be able to marry Pocahontas. So we know from his own words, that, to use his expression, "he burned for her." Which I suppose if you're going to put it in modern slang, he had the hots for her. And clearly did love her. So while it is true that we can say, yes, Rolfe had strong passionate feelings for Pocahontas, and it's quite likely that they were reciprocated. Otherwise, I don't think he would have been perhaps so much in love with her. It was obvious that at the time, it was a benefit to both cultures. The Powhatans of Tidewater, Virginia and the Virginia English to have this union serve as a rapprochement and as a diplomatic vehicle for perhaps not only a period of peace between the cultures, but perhaps the hope for

at least peaceful coexistence in the future. And in that sense, it was very much a marriage of state. Which I am sure from, even though Pocahontas was Powhatan's daughter, she was one of 60 odd children, the English do say that she was his favorite. We only have their word for it, but according to them she was. But I think he was, he could not have been as successful as paramount chief of 15,000 people if he weren't politically savvy as well. So I'm sure he saw the benefits as much as the counsel governing the colony of Virginia saw it, acting on behalf of the Virginia Company of London, back in jolly old England.

Mark: That was great, Dr. Potter. A different version of Pocahontas, but if anything, even more interesting because it's factual and more true to life.

Dr. Potter's going to be speaking, like I said this evening, giving a talk at NCTC. He's been nice enough to visit us today September 9th. Thank you very much for your time, and thank you for listening.

Stephen: And thank you for inviting me, Dr. Madison.

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